Is there a hidden Test Answer Key in the Aqedah?

A Literary Structural Study

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Abstract

The Aqedah ("Binding of Isaac") or the Sacrifice of Isaac of Genesis 22:1-19 is framed as a divine test (v. 1). Scholars recognize the "structure matches exactly what a test is made up of." Yet, paradox and tension mark Abraham's trial. Why does God test Abraham by requiring the horrific sacrifice of Isaac then reverse himself? Since literary structure reveals the vision of the narrator, Jacques Doukhan's chiastic structure (vv. 1-12) convincingly delineates the plot tension and dialogues. But verses 13-19 also correlate with parts of the chiasm and covenant revelations, assuming the shape of a metaphorical key. If the list of covenant blessings is a divine interpretation of Abraham's test response—"because you have done this thing"—God's last words in the Aqedah may be the test answer key to this enigmatic test.

Doukhan's Chiastic Structure (adapted)

Gen 21:31 – 22:1, Prelude: Beersheba, theme of return, ‘Now it came after these things’
A, vv. 1-2. Dialogue: God (Elôhîm) and Abraham
a. God’s call
b. Abraham’s response, hinnênî
c. Order / Abraham
d. Order / the son, mountain to be designated

B, vv. 3-6. Abraham’s walk
a. Departure
b. Wood on Isaac
c. Takes fire in his hand, and knife
d. ‘The two of them went together’

C, vv. 7-8. Dialogue: Abraham and Isaac
a. Silence
b. Question
c. Response, hinnênî
d. Silence

B1, vv. 9-10. Abraham’s walk
a. Arrival
b. Isaac on wood
c. Takes knife in his hand

A1, vv. 11-12. Dialogue: God (Angel of YHWH) and Abraham
a. God’s call
b. Abraham’s response, hinnênî
c. Order / the son, mountain designated
d. Blessing

Gen 22:19-20, Postlude: Beersheba, theme of return, ‘Now it came after these things’

Visual Models of the Aqedah Literary Structure

Conclusion

Sequential linguistic connections suggest the Aqedah is more comprehensive and deliberately designed than previously assumed. The verses of Genesis 22:13-18 as mapped against the backdrop of the narrative chiastic structure, resemble the shape of a key. This was hidden in the final section (A1) of the original chiastic structure.

The Aqedah list of covenant blessings evoke in a sequential retrograde manner all the previous covenant revelations of Abraham’s covenant journey except for the 6th Revelation (Genesis 18: Abraham’s intercession over Sodom and Gomorrah). The absence of intercession for Isaac in the Aqedah text has long been noted by scholars. The corresponding absence of that covenant lesson from the test key list as well as the presence of other covenantal indications in the test hints that God’s last speech could be an interpretive reward-assessment of Abraham’s test response, a function analogous to a test answer key.

If these verses function as an answer key for the Aqedah, they hold the potential to unlock the divine purpose and meaning of the test. R. W. L. Moerberly is convinced that God’s final speech in this last section is an interpretation or commentary on what precedes it. If he is correct, and this appears to be the case, the Aqedah (Binding of Isaac) may not need anyone to “unbind” it. The Aqedah unbinds itself.

Sources


